ED385778 1995-00-00 New Ways of Learning in the Workplace. ERIC Digest No. 161.

ERIC Development Team

www.eric.ed.gov

Table of Contents

If you're viewing this document online, you can click any of the topics below to link directly to that section.

ERIC Identifier: ED385778
Publication Date: 1995-00-00
Author: Lankard, Bettina A.
Source: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult Career and Vocational Education Columbus OH.

New Ways of Learning in the Workplace. ERIC Digest No. 161.

THIS DIGEST WAS CREATED BY ERIC, THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER. FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT ERIC, CONTACT ACCESS ERIC 1-800-LET-ERIC
In today's "high performance organizations," workers must be prepared for continuous

on-the-job growth and development. Given the increased age, variety of experiences, and diverse lifestyles and cultures of the working population, it is understandable that adult education practices must move beyond the traditional model of teachers as purveyors of knowledge and learners as passive recipients. Methods and techniques that draw upon workers' previous experiences, link concepts and practices, and encourage reflection and the transfer of knowledge from one situation to another are vital to the learning process. This Digest addresses some of the new ways to learn at work, such as action learning, situated learning, and incidental learning.

ACTION LEARNING

Action learning is a systematic process through which individuals learn by doing. It is based on the premise that learning requires action and action requires learning. It engages individuals in just-in-time learning by "providing opportunities for them to develop knowledge and understanding at the appropriate time based on immediate felt needs" (Lewis and Williams 1994, p. 11). Learning itself is the desired outcome of action learning, not problem solving. It is the learning that occurs in the process of finding solutions to problems that constitutes action learning. It is a type of learning that helps individuals respond more effectively to change.

Action learning has been adopted in the workplace as a viable approach to experiential management education and development and an important element of a training and development strategy (Vince and Martin 1993). It involves the members of an organization in group situations with the goal of helping each group member learn through the process of finding solutions to their own problems. Through this process, learners increase their self-awareness and develop new knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and skills for making changes and redefining their roles within new contexts (Williams 1992). The properties of action learning clarify its relevance to workplace learning (Beaty et al. 1993):

- Learning is based on the solution of real problems.

- Learning occurs with and from others who are also engaged in

  managing real problems.

- Members of the group are responsible for solving their own

  problems, unlike those on a project team or task force.

Members of the group are concerned with implementing actions,

moving beyond the stages of analysis and recommendation.

SITUATED LEARNING

Situated learning is another approach that is receiving attention in the field of adult and workplace learning. In the situated learning approach, knowledge and skills are taught in contexts that reflect how the knowledge will be used in real-life situations. This strategy is based on the premise that knowledge is not independent, but fundamentally situated, being in part a product of the activity, context, and culture in which it is developed (Brown et al. 1988). Orey and Nelson (1994) elaborate on this explanation, stating that "learning requires more than just thought and action, or a particular physical or social situation, or just receiving a body of factual knowledge; it also requires participation in the actual practices of the culture" (p. 623). Thus, in situated learning, it is the authentic social context in which learning occurs that offers the benefit of increased knowledge and offers the learner the potential for applying that knowledge in new ways and in new situations.
Cognitive apprenticeship is one example of situated learning in which learners participate in a community of practice that is developed through activity and social interaction, in ways similar to that in craft apprenticeships (McLellan 1994). However, "cognitive apprenticeship supports learning in a domain by enabling students to acquire, develop, and use cognitive tools in authentic domain activity" (ibid., p. 5), which means the activities are performed in the context of the work environment. Student teaching is another example of situated learning in that learning occurs in an authentic setting where learners experience the cultural and interpersonal aspects of work in the teaching profession.

In the theory of situated learning, "knowledge is viewed as co-produced by the learner and the situation; engagement of the learner in the situation is critical" (Damarin 1993, p. 28). Damarin clarifies learning and cognition in a situation by using the distinction between traveler and tourist as a clarifying metaphor:

A traveler and a tourist can visit the same city,

but experience it very differently. A tourist's

goals are typically to see all the sights, learn

their names, make and collect stunning pictures,

eat the foods, and observe the rituals of the

city. A traveler, on the other hand, seeks to

understand the city, to know and live briefly

among the people, to understand the languages,

both verbal and non-verbal, and to participate in

the rituals of the city. At the end of equally

long visits, the tourist is likely to have seen

more monuments, but the traveler is more likely to

know how to use the public transportation.

(p. 29)

INCIDENTAL LEARNING

Situated learning, like action learning, stresses that behavior change is more likely to occur as a result of reflection on experience. Incidental learning--another way to "learn at work"--differs in that it involves little or no reflection. Ross-Gordon and Dowling (1995) give the following definition of incidental learning:
Incidental learning is defined as a spontaneous

action or transaction, the intention of which is

task accomplishment, but which serendipitously

increases particular knowledge, skills, or

understanding. Incidental learning, then,

includes such things as learning from mistakes,

learning by doing, learning through networking,

learning from a series of interpersonal

experiments. (p. 315)

Incidental learning is unintentional and unexamined. It is not based on reflection; thus the learning is embedded in the learner's actions.

The difficulty in validating incidental learning as an effective learning strategy is that

learning is not anticipated, and, therefore, not easily assessed. The primary intent of the activity is to accomplish the task, not to learn. When incidental learning occurs, it is a surprise--a byproduct of other activity. The learner discovers something while in the process of doing something else. To act upon and pursue that discovery, the learner must pull away from the primary or planned task and examine the discovery clearly before he/she can learn from it. Awareness of opportunities and the value of such learning may be brought to learners' attention by emphasizing the outcomes they might anticipate through incidental learning (Mealman 1993):

- Increased competence

- Increased self-knowledge

- Value for lifelong learning

- Improved life skills

- Development of self-confidence

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF ACTION, SITUATED,

AND INCIDENTAL LEARNINGEach of the ways of learning reviewed in this Digest share common qualities and attributes. For example, action learning, situated learning, and incidental learning all engage learners in experiential learning. The gap between the learner and expert disappears as all individuals are considered to be expert in some capacity in the work community. Additionally, all three ways of learning have a collective dimension. In the workplace, learning often takes place in teams, enhanced by communication and collaboration among the individual members and groups and shared across the organization. "Decisions are often taken and implemented by groups and are affected by explicitly or implicitly shared social norms, social history, social values, and social beliefs" (Watkins and Marsick 1992, p. 294). Because the workplace context is social and requires interpersonal interaction, the individual's interpretation of a

situation and his/her subsequent actions are subject to a great number of differences. Learning in context--action learning, situated learning, incidental learning--provides the opportunity for workers to clarify their understanding of a situation within the social context and reduce the incidence of misinterpretation or faulty learning.

Conditions that enhance learning that are common to the three approaches are as follows (ibid.):

●

1. Proactivity--in which the learner takes charge of and

directs his/her learning. It is similar to the conditions

of autonomy and empowerment.

●

2. Critical reflection--in which learners "identify and make

explicit norms, values, and assumptions that are hidden from

conscious awareness" and challenge the "way things are done

around here" (p. 297)

●

3. Creativity--which enables people to think beyond their own

points of view, to see situations in a variety of different

lights.

VALUE OF THE THREE APPROACHES IN HIGH

PERFORMANCE ORGANIZATIONSToday's high performance organizations foster continuous learning for continuous improvement, a practice congruent with total quality management. Driven by a rapidly changing global market, organizations are seeking new ways to think, organize, communicate, and work. The relationship between workers and managers is shifting. Workers are required to take more responsibility for their work and to have skills in critical thinking and problem solving. Managers need to learn the role of facilitator and change their old patterns of directing. New ways of learning that involve experiential activity offer promise to organizations striving to achieve high

performance. The concepts and practices of action learning, situated learning, and incidental learning also have potential for the professional and self-development of workers who will work in these organizations.

REFERENCES

Beaty, L.; Bourner, T.; and Frost, P. "Action Learning: Reflections on Becoming a Set Member." MANAGEMENT EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT 24, no. 4 (Winter 1993): 350-367. (EJ 473 883)
Brown, J. S. et al. SITUATED COGNITION AND THE CULTURE OF LEARNING. TECHNICAL REPORT. Palo Alto, CA: Palo Alto Research Center, 1988. (ED 342 357)

Damarin, S. K. "School and Situated Knowledge: Travel or Tourism?" EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY 33, no. 3 (March 1993): 27-32. (EJ 461 594)

Lewis, L. H., and Williams, C. J. "Experiential Learning: Past and Present." NEW DIRECTIONS FOR ADULT AND CONTINUING EDUCATION no. 62 (Summer 1994): 5-16. (EJ 492 388)

McLellan, H. "Situated Learning: Continuing the Conversation." EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY 34, no. 8 (October 1994): 7-8. (EJ 491 532)

Mealman, C. A. "Incidental Learning by Adults in a Nontraditional Degree Program: A Case Study." In PROCEEDINGS OF

THE TWELFTH ANNUAL MIDWEST RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE CONFERENCE, edited by K. Freer and G. Dean. Columbus: College of Education, the Ohio State University, October 1993. (ED 362 663)

Orey, M. A., and Nelson, W. A. "Situated Learning and the Limits of Applying the Results of These Data to the Theories of Cognitive Apprenticeships." In PROCEEDINGS OF SELECTED RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT PRESENTATIONS AT THE 1994 NATIONAL CONVENTION OF

THE ASSOCIATION FOR EDUCATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS AND TECHNOLOGY, edited by M. R. Simonson et al. Washington, DC: AECT, February 1994. (ED 373 746)

Ross-Gordon, J. M., and Dowling, W. D. "Adult Learning in the Context of African-American Women's Voluntary Organizations." INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LIFELONG EDUCATION 14, no. 4 (July-August 1995): 306-319.

Vince, R., and Martin, L. "Inside Action Learning: An Exploration of the Psychology and Politics of the Action Learning Model." MANAGEMENT EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT 24, no. 3 (Fall 1993): 205-215. (EJ 469 978)

Watkins, K. E., and Marsick, V. J. "Toward a Theory of Informal and Incidental Learning in Organizations." INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LIFELONG EDUCATION 11, no. 4 (October-December 1992): 287-300. (EJ 451 048)

Williams, R. L. "Social Advocates and Action Learning: The Discontent Dancing with Hope." NEW DIRECTIONS FOR ADULT AND CONTINUING EDUCATION, no. 53 (Spring 1992): 37-50. (EJ 446 775)

—

Title: New Ways of Learning in the Workplace. ERIC Digest No. 161.
Document Type: Information Analyses---ERIC Information Analysis Products (IAPs) (071); Information Analyses---ERIC Digests (Selected) in Full Text (073);
Descriptors: Adult Education, Experiential Learning, Incidental Learning, Labor Force Development, Learning Strategies, Lifelong Learning, On the Job Training, Staff Development, Teaching Methods
Identifiers: ERIC Digests, Situated Learning
###

—

▲

[Return to ERIC Digest Search Page]